

Music and Controversy: The Cycle Continues

JILL SHIRLEY / SPRING 2004

Almost every generation has a musical artist that pushed the envelope and angered people. Recently, the media has helped push the hype even further. An artist pushes the envelope, people get mad, the media reports the controversy, parents or organizations ban the album, children and members of said organization eat up the albums like candy. Rinse. Repeat if necessary. For modern music, this repetition seems absolutely necessary – possibly even deliberate. When a new controversial artist comes along, everyone forgets what transpired with the artist before (which is usually not much) and starts the cycle all over again.

The newest controversial artist is probably Janet Jackson. Thanks to her “titillating” performance at the Super Bowl, people became outraged, the FCC overreacted by broadcasting every other major event with a five second delay, nobody could stop talking about it for days and weeks ... and yet her album, which came out soon after the debacle, has sold millions. All the fuss over a woman’s breast just made that woman a lot of money, something I’m sure the fuss-ers were hoping wouldn’t happen. What is the reason for this? The old cliché is that sex sells. While that still holds true for the most part, it appears the new slogan for recording artists is: Controversy Sells. Get them talking if you want to sell your album, even if what they’re saying isn’t very nice. (An interesting side note: a historian named Angela McShane Jones conducted research after the scandal, and found that a woman baring her breasts was commonplace in the 1600’s, a practice started by the Queen and her court and copied by the common women as a means of titillating the public. Janet’s “wardrobe malfunction” would not have even raised an eyebrow in the 17th century.)

It is not a new idea. Controversy helped artists as far back as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart sell their music – because come on, would Mozart be half as interesting if people didn’t think he was stark crazy? Of course, he very well could have been perfectly sane, but aside from his immense talent, the idea that he might have been insane has helped keep Mozart surrounded interest and intrigue. However, the controversy-anger-\$\$\$ cycle didn’t really get rolling until there was a media in place to really exploit it.

Do you remember Elvis Presley’s appearance on Ed Sullivan? Even if you weren’t born yet the media has talked about it and shown the clip countless times since it happened. If the story is unfamiliar, it goes a little like this: Elvis shakes his booty while singing this new-fangled rock and roll stuff on the Ed Sullivan show. Ed Sullivan, worrying about families watching the show, becomes outraged. The cameramen are commanded to shoot Elvis from the waist up only, lest his booty-shaking permanently damages some poor young sap’s mind beyond recognition. The appearance is seen by 52 million people – one out of every three Americans. Now if you were in fact the lucky one of you and your two best friends, you know perfectly well that your mind was in fact *not* addled irreparably – although to be fair you never actually saw the booty shake. When this story is talked about in the media now, they say things like “Can you believe we became upset over a little shake of the pelvis?” and “It’s so tame by today’s standards.” Yet what are these standards, and how and when do they change? When does the faint-worthy become blasé?

Soon it was the Beatles’ long hair that caused women to gasp and men to shake their heads (“They look like goddamn girls” my grandfather always used to say). Then it was the Rolling Stones’ sexual lyrics – a controversy that is still prevalent, as the Stones were not allowed to play some of their songs, including “Let’s Spend the Night Together”, during their first concert in China (Let’s Spend the Night Together ... mmm, the dirtiest of the dirty talk). Of course, no one could have foreseen that men’s hair would soon get longer than the women’s hair, or that the Stones’ lyrics would seem downright Puritan next to Prince or Ludacris.

And that is the point. I asked earlier how the standards change. They change when someone comes along and pushes the envelope farther than the artist before them could. We could not have Eminem without N.W.A or Ice-T setting the bar for gangster rap, or Public Enemy setting the bar for wit and reality in rap music. The Janet Jackson incident could not have happened without Lil' Kim practically baring her boobs at every award show she's ever been to. Who knows how many artists have been influenced by Frank Zappa's antics, from Ozzy Osbourne to Marilyn Manson, and there would be no Marilyn Manson without David Bowie or Alice Cooper or Iggy Pop or Black Sabbath. Heck, none of them would be around without John Lennon proclaiming his band as bigger than Jesus. And John Lennon wouldn't have been without Elvis shaking his booty. Artists set a precedent, and future artists try and make a name for themselves by shattering the old precedent and creating their own. It is how attitudes toward sex, violence, cursing, new fashions, social groups and everything else change.

None of this would be possible without the media. Thanks to their obsessive scrutiny of all things celebratory and/or scandalous, viewers are bombarded with reports and opinions on controversial artists and their controversial albums. What those who rail and rant at these artists don't know, is the more they make a big deal out of it, the more consumers want to buy the albums. They want to see what all the fuss is about. Inevitably, the fuss is over a simple booty shake or fashion statement or bare breast that will soon be boring next to the Next Big Controversy.